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Viewing cable 08ANKARA1331, TURKISH GULENIST SCHOOLS: "BE EVERYWHERE OR BE

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
08ANKARA1331	2008-07-25 10:01	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL//NOFORN	Embassy Ankara

Appears in these articles:

<http://www.taraf.com.tr/haber/abd-belgelerinde-fethullah-gulen.htm>

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PP RUEH DU RUEHFL RUEHKW RUEHLA RUEHMR RUEHPA RUEHRN RUEHROV RUEHSR
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 001331

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/03/2018
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SCUL](#) [SOCI](#) [TU](#)
SUBJECT: TURKISH GULENIST SCHOOLS: "BE EVERYWHERE OR BE NOWHERE"

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. Gulenist-administered Turkish schools are inspired by the same humanistic philosophy no matter where they operate in Turkey or the world, according to teachers and students at a leading Gulenist math and science school in Ankara. The teachers underscored that these schools must adhere to the education system of the host country, while the students emphasized the full-time attention the teachers at their schools provide them and their families. The opportunity to study and teach abroad is a major attraction for many, both students and teachers alike. The Gulenist communities on campuses in cities hosting Turkey's major universities are a key source of recruitment for new teachers, central to advancing Fetullah Gulen's humanistic "movement." The schools are already well established in Turkey, with growth now focused on the country's East. Overseas, the schools are concentrated in Africa, Central Asia and the Balkans, but are also found in the United States and elsewhere. The Gulenists plan continued growth. According to Gulen, in order to open up to humanity, one must be everywhere. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) We met recently on two occasions with administrators, teachers and students at Ankara's Samanyolu High School, one of Turkey's leading math and science schools, administered by a Fetullah Gulen community-associated foundation. According to the teachers, eight of Turkey's one hundred top math and science high school graduates came out of Samanyolu last year, including the top math and science graduate in the country. (There were approximately 1.5 million Turkish high school graduates in 2007.) Many Samanyolu boarding students come from Turkey's provincial cities, and the school also hosts a number of foreign students on exchange programs. A large percentage of Samanyolu teachers, including those we spoke to, have taught abroad.

"AFFECTION FOR HUMANITY IS OUR PHILOSOPHY"

¶3. (SBU) The Samanyolu teachers we met with, Mehmet and Servet, had previously taught in Ukraine and Vietnam respectively, before returning to Turkey. They emphasized that their schools strictly follow the educational system of the host countries. Most programs are taught in English or the local language; Turkish history and religion is not taught abroad, and Turkish language is only an elective at some schools in some countries. Thumbing through pictures from schools in Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine, we noted that many of the teachers appeared to be local and mixed-gender (unlike this particular Samanyolu school, which is all male). Mehmet and Servet emphasized that most teachers are, in fact, local residents and not Fetullah Gulen adherents. The common denominator, they said, is a love for humanity.

¶4. (SBU) Both teachers noted that cultural adaptation for Turkish teachers is not easy, and often takes time, but they stressed their enthusiasm for learning the local culture and getting to know students' families quickly dispels any prejudices and concerns among the local people. Servet noted that in former Soviet republics, Turks continue to face prejudices deriving from the Soviet legacy where Turkey was degraded as part of the West and Turkish culture as dangerous, but the animosity, he said, is lessening. Mehmet joked about how intelligence officers in Kazakhstan had been parked outside a Turkish school each day when it first opened, but then went on to enroll their kids there.

¶5. (SBU) One student, Salum, from Tanzania, recalled when the Turkish teachers came to Tanzania in 1998. There was a huge desperation for schools, but a concern existed about whether these foreigners would seek to impose a foreign culture on the students. Soon, the school's teachers were warmly welcomed and celebrated in the community. Compared to Tanzanian teachers, who he said are often aggressive, he found his Turkish teachers to be calm and patient. Moreover, enrollment at a Turkish school meant you could successfully

complete your exams without having to pay corrupt public school teachers for private tutoring. Salum, who is 23, recently completed one year of Turkish language training at Gazi University, and intends to begin studying math at Ankara's prestigious English-language Middle East Technical

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University (METU). His experience, he said, has instilled in him a desire to serve his country and be a teacher, and perhaps even Education Minister one day.

BUILDING A "MOVEMENT"

16. (SBU) Salum's experience, along with that of another student with whom we met, Bedar, an Albanian graduate of a Turkish high school currently studying at Hacettepe University in Ankara, illustrated how the schools' graduates grow the Gulenist movement worldwide. University students, like Salum and Bedar, coming from provincial Anatolia or abroad, are often in need of housing when they attend Turkish universities in Istanbul, Ankara and other large cities. On the campuses of these cities there are Gulenist communities. According to the Samanyolu teachers, the students lodge with these communities, eventually become "members," join "the education department," and go abroad as teachers.

17. (SBU) Gulenist schools are well established in Turkey and the procedures for opening a new school are clear, Servet told us; there are about 300 in operation. The number of schools in eastern Turkey is growing, but there is no fixed geographic plan, only "to be everywhere," he said. Local businessmen facilitate new school openings. For example, there are numerous schools in commercial centers, like Konya, Antalya and Istanbul, whereas in Van there is only one. But the teachers noted proudly that there is now one Gulenist school in almost every Turkish province. Mehmet underscored Fetullah Gulen's teaching philosophy that instructs his followers to "open up to humanity." "Whomever is not everywhere is nowhere," Mehmet said, quoting Gulen. "You must be globalized to be localized." Servet added that teaching is "an activity that places humanity at its center," allowing Gulen's followers to set good examples and implement Gulen's philosophy. The philosophy is more important than the technique, said Servet.

18. (SBU) According to Servet, tuition at top-performing Gulenist schools in Turkey (about \$10,000 per year) is generally less than at other private schools in Turkey, even as the schools offer instruction in English and their graduates generally out-perform other students in Turkey. Scholarships are available, and many of the schools target underprivileged students and neighborhoods, both in Turkey and abroad (though Gulenist schools often educate the middle class and elite in countries outside of Turkey). We met one American citizen high school student of Albanian descent who is on a three-week exchange, residing with the Turkish family of a Samanyolu student. He described positively his experience at a Turkish-run math and science academy in Chicago. His school primarily serves African-American students and students of Mexican descent, he said. He emphasized the importance his teachers place on traveling and competing in math and science fairs, which he said he and his colleagues often win. Turkish is an elective at his school, but other foreign languages are also taught.

NO STRONG TIES BETWEEN GOVERNMENT AND GULENIST SCHOOLS

19. (SBU) The teachers described a lack of official ties between their schools abroad, the local Turkish Embassy and local representatives of other Turkish government agencies, such as the Turkish Agency for International Development (TIKA). The local Turkish Ambassador will often attend school ceremonies and graduations, but that is about the extent of the relationship. In fact, in many of the countries where Gulenist schools operate, such as in

Afghanistan, the Turkish Ministry of Education administers an official Turkish state school. Mehmet noted, however, that TIKA, for the first time last year, co-sponsored the sixth annual "Turkish Language Olympics," which brings Turkish language students from around the world to Turkey, indicating a renewed GOT interest in these schools' capacity to help promote Turkish culture, even if it is not a primary objective. (NOTE: The GOT will sometimes cite indirectly Gulenist schools -- euphemistically known as "Turkish NGO schools" -- in their statistics describing Turkish development assistance abroad. END NOTE.) One exception to the non-official nature of these schools abroad is northern Iraq, according to Mehmet. There, the GOT has sought to

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engage more directly with the schools. He noted that Barzani and Talabani grandchildren all attend Gulenist schools in northern Iraq, as do Iraqi Arab, Turkmen and other Kurdish students.

"THIS IS NOT A POLITICAL MOVEMENT"

¶10. (SBU) Asked why suspicion of the Gulenist community exists in Turkey, Mehmet replied that those who accuse Gulen of surreptitious activities are projecting their own fears and intentions on him. "I am as I look and I will be the same," he said, quoting the Mevlana. There is no evidence of Gulen or his supporters trying to direct politics, he stressed; this is not a political movement, but a way of life. "It is only a political problem for certain people." Mehmet did not shrink away from describing the Gulenist movement as an "Islamic movement," but noted that its philosophy stands in contrast to radicalism or fundamentalism. For example, the movement is restricted by the governments of Syria and Iran from operating schools there. Emphasizing the movement's humanistic aspect, he said Gulen's followers do not preach religious teaching; they only try to set an example through their lifestyles. (NOTE: In response to suspicions about the schools, Gulen has said he would not oppose the state taking over the financing and/or direct operation of (his movement's) educational activities, so long as the activities somehow continue. END NOTE.)

¶11. (SBU) Commenting on the ongoing political upheavals in Turkey, Servet expressed a note of confidence. The Turkish nation, he said, bounces back quickly from every political or economic crisis. A political party (i.e., AKP) might be closed, but better days are on the horizon, followed by economic growth. Mehmet added that Turkish society is active and lively, while the state is moribund. This will change and democracy will succeed. If the EU process is pursued actively, he said, Turkey will achieve this more quickly. The government, he opined, slowed down the EU process; if it had not, Turkey would not be facing the problems it is today. Both teachers expressed a sense of admiration for the American political system, observing that whichever political party is elected, there is a fundamental consensus in the U.S. about the country's principles and values.

COMMENT:

"DON'T TRUST THE MAN WHO ONLY READS ONE BOOK"

¶12. (C) Samanyolu High School teachers and administrators have undoubtedly much to be proud of. Their students are high-achievers; their facility, compared to the average Turkish public school, is first rate; and they have promoted valuable -- and rare -- cross cultural exchanges among Turks and the rest of the world, especially in the developing world. Given this and other Gulenist schools' concrete, positive achievements, it is difficult to see how the schools, or the Gulenist movement of which they are the vanguard, constitute any threat to Turkey's secular democratic order. But suspicions run deep among Turks outside the movement, even among those without a strong secular pre-disposition. One Ankara University professor, an ethnic Uighur with whom we recently spoke, who is familiar

with the work of Gulenist schools in Central Asia, offered an old Chinese saying: "Don't trust the man who reads only one book." Gulenist school students, especially those who are boarding away from home, have their reading and television strictly controlled, he said. He recalled an academic colleague who sent his son to a Gulenist school. The son has excelled in physics, but he now, for example, criticizes the father for drinking raki at dinner (a national pastime for Turks), and the father laments that he has lost his son. Analogies between Gulen and the Ayatollah Khomeini, the professor suggested, are misplaced. Gulenists do not seek to dramatically overthrow Turkey's secular order; the change they seek is within.

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WILSON